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## ABSTRACT

The differences in discipline practices between African Americans and White Americans were studied. A survey was conducted of 130 introductory psychology students from 2 southwestern universities, 1 historically Black and the other predominantly White. A questionnaire elicited biographical data and information about discipline practices and beliefs of their parents. The chi-square test and analysis of variance were used to analyze the data. Results showed that parents of both White and African-American subjects would punish misbehavior that occurred outside the home, but that the place and time of punishment differed. Also it was found that, while 87.5% of the mothers were responsible for discipline in African-American families, only 51% of the mothers in White families had that responsibility. There were also significant main effects of educational level on the tendency to use reinforcement and of racial differences in parenting beliefs. (Contains 5 tables and 14 references.) (Author/SLD)

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## Racial Differences in Parental Discipline Practices

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## Racial Differences in Parental Discipline

### Abstract

This study investigated the differences in discipline practices between African-Americans and White Americans. The following question was addressed: Do African-Americans and White Americans differ in discipline practices?

A survey was conducted of 130 introductory psychology students from two universities, one Historically Black, and the other, predominantly White. A questionnaire elicited biographical data of subjects and information regarding the discipline practices and beliefs of their parent(s) or guardian(s). The chi-square test and an analysis of variance technique were used to analyze the data.

Results showed that both parents of White and African-American subjects would punish misbehavior that occurred outside the home, but the place and time of punishment differed. Also, it was found that while 87.5% of the mothers were responsible for discipline in the African-American families, only 51% of the mothers in the White families had that responsibility. There were also significant main effects of educational level on the tendency to use reinforcement, and of racial differences in parenting beliefs.

This study helps clarify areas of differences in parental discipline practices between African-Americans and White Americans.

## Racial Differences in Parental Discipline Practices

A commonly held belief is that there are differences between African-Americans and Whites in parenting practices, and more specifically, discipline practices. However, only a few studies have focused on ethnic differences in parenting or parent-child relationships (Stinnett, Talley, & Walters, 1973; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Wasserman, Rauh, Brunelli, Garcia-Castro, & Necos, 1990; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991), and fewer still on ethnic differences in discipline practices in particular (eg. Bollin, 1989). In addition, the majority of the studies on parenting styles have been conducted with white, middle-class samples.

In some of the earliest studies on parenting practices and their effects (Baumrind, 1967; Baumrind & Black, 1967), three major styles of parenting were identified: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Each of these styles comprised a cluster of behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. These studies found that different parenting styles were correlated with different types of offspring behavior, such as independence and self-reliance. In a follow-up study, Baumrind (1972) analyzed separately the data for the Black families and, while she noted that her sample was very small, she also noted that there were differential outcomes for the offspring of African-Americans in her sample and for the offspring of the White parents.

Specifically, while authoritative parenting styles were associated with greater independence in the offspring of European-American parents, the authoritarian style produced the greatest independence in female offspring of African-Americans. In addition, she noted that although authoritarian parenting is associated with fearful, timid behavior, and behavioral compliance among European-American children, it is associated with assertiveness among African-American girls.

Since that time, numerous studies (eg. Baumrind, 1978; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch & Darling, 1992) have supported Baumrind's findings that, in general, authoritative parenting styles, which are characterized by a high degree of parental control, use of reason, the encouragement of open communication, and open expression of affection, produced greater offspring independence, self-reliance, self-esteem and higher school achievement. As stated, however, the majority of these studies have used white, middle-class subjects. Given Baumrind's findings, the possibility exists that the relationship between parenting style and offspring behavior is not so clear for subjects of other cultural or racial groups. Indeed, Dornbusch et al. (1987) and Steinberg et al. (1991) have found that the relationship between authoritative parenting and school performance is stronger among European and Hispanic-American adolescents than among Asian and African-American adolescents, despite each using different measures of authoritative parenting.

Darling and Steinberg (1993) argued that parenting style should be studied within the social context in which the family exists, noting the discrepancy in Baumrind's (1972) study between African-American and European-American offspring resulting from authoritarian parenting. They argued that different social contexts within which certain racial groups operate (for instance, goals desired by parents), could produce different effects despite similar parenting practices. Ogbu (1981) similarly argued that different cultures require unique instrumental competencies to survive and succeed in that culture; child-rearing practices are the culture's way of ensuring that its offspring are sufficiently prepared to meet the demands of their culture.

Kelley, Power and Wimbush (1992) made a similar point when they noted that much of the research conducted to date has evaluated parenting practices of minorities from white models of parenting with the result that differences are viewed as deficits. They added that a further problem is that many comparison studies have confounded race and socioeconomic status.

Although researchers have begun to study ethnic differences in parenting styles and their effects, only a few studies to date have focused specifically on cultural or racial differences in discipline practices (eg. Deley, 1988). Discipline practices comprise a more narrow set of parental behaviors designed to teach a child right from wrong and self-discipline.

In a recent study, Bollin (1989) found ethnic differences in day care providers' beliefs regarding discipline practices. Specifically, she found that African-Americans believed more frequently than Whites that adults should intervene immediately when children are arguing or fighting among themselves. Thus, there is still little known about the differences in parenting between members of different cultures, and more specifically, those discipline practices. The purpose of this study then, was to determine if there are differences in discipline practices between African-American and White parents.

#### Method

##### Subjects

Subjects were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses from two different Southeastern Universities, located approximately 20 miles apart. One was a Historically Black University, from which 68 African-American students were drawn, and one was a large land-grant University from which 62 White students were drawn. All subjects volunteered and received extra course credit for their participation.

##### Materials

An experimenter-made questionnaire consisting of 110 items regarding discipline practices of the subject's parent(s) was used. Subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed to 60 statements regarding specific practices or beliefs of their parents regarding discipline. Twenty-four items asked

the subjects to list which punishments (if any) their parents would have used for a list of transgressions. Nine items asked the subjects to indicate whether their parents would have punished them immediately at a designated location, at home later, or if they would have ignored the behavior. Biographical data were also obtained, including occupation, income, and education level of parents, as well as age of parents at time of the subject's birth.

#### Procedure

After signing the informed consent form, subjects completed an experimenter-constructed questionnaire on discipline practices.

#### Results

It was found that more of the White subjects (75%) than African-American subjects (59%) spent their childhood with two parents, while as much as 32% of the African-American subjects spent their childhood with their mother alone compared to 25% of their White counterparts. These differences were significant. (See Table 1.)

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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There was no significant relationship between family income and race. As shown in Table 2, 77% of the White subjects

reported higher incomes (\$40,000 and above) compared to 65% of the African-Americans ( $\chi^2 = 2.35$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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The two groups of subjects were not different in terms of age of parents when subjects were born, proportion of employed parents, whether or not parents were self-employed or worked for others, or educational level. However, mothers of African-American subjects (74%) were more likely than the fathers to have the highest degree in the family compared to the White subjects where 54% of the fathers were reported to have the highest degree in the family ( $\chi^2=11.61$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ , see Table 3).

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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In terms of discipline practices, African-American and White families did not differ regarding the types of behaviors that were punished or reinforced, nor on the tendency to explain to their children why they were being punished. However, the two groups differed significantly on what the subjects perceived their parents' beliefs to be regarding discipline practices, ( $t=3.06$ ,  $df=128$ ,  $p<.05$ , see Table 4). Specifically, African-

American subjects saw their parents' disciplinary beliefs as more parent-centered than white subjects did.

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Insert Table 4 About Here

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Also, while the main effect of education on the tendency to reinforce appropriate behaviors was significant ( $F=4.5$ ,  $df=1,121$ ,  $p<.05$ ), the main effect of race was not. Specifically, the less educated parents, that is noncollege graduates, from both races would reinforce good behaviors and achievements more than the higher educated ones. Perhaps this is because educated parents tend to have higher expectations of their children and thus do not regard achievements as much a big deal as do less educated parents of both races.

Other differences in beliefs were: more Black than White parents would believe that children should be raised to become independent ( $\chi^2=9.72$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ), that children should be obedient, that sparing the "rod" spoils the child ( $\chi^2=13.88$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and that parents should be more strict with girls than with boys. It was also found that more White parents than Black parents would believe that physical punishment should be used as an exception ( $\chi^2=3.55$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

There were no significant differences among the African-American and White families on how they would deal with a misbehavior at various locations such as on the street, at a

theater, at a friend's, neighbor's, church, park, restaurant, grocery store, or department store. However, there were significant differences in whether the punishment would be meted out right away or postponed. Specifically, both races tended not to ignore a misbehavior that happened outside the home. But, African-American families tended to punish the child right away if the transgression occurred at a grocery store ( $\chi^2=11.51$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ) or a department store, while White parents would postpone punishment till later ( $\chi^2=11.44$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ). It also appeared that more of both White and African-American parents would punish immediately on the street and at the park. On the other hand, both groups would more likely postpone punishment till a later time for misbehavior that occurred at the theater, a friend's, neighbor's, church, or a restaurant. Interestingly, there was a significant difference between Whites and African-Americans regarding which parent or individual was responsible for discipline in the home ( $\chi^2 =22.29$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In both races, mothers tended to be the disciplinarian; however, among the African-American families, 88% of the mothers were responsible, while among the White families, only 51% of the mothers played that role.

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Insert Table 5 About Here

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In terms of types of punishment given by parents, the following misbehaviors elicited similar responses from White and Black parents: scratching, fighting with relatives, throwing tantrums, biting, whining, fighting with siblings, disobedience, rudeness, name-calling, throwing things, breaking things, lying, cheating, earning bad grades at school, shoplifting, bullying other kids, and making fun of other children. The most frequently used punishments with the above misbehaviors, in their order of frequency, were whipping or spanking, having a serious talk with child, shouting, yelling and/or cursing, sending child to own room, or denying privileges.

The two races, however, differed significantly in their patterns of responses to the following misbehaviors. For arguing with siblings more Blacks (31%) than Whites (18%) would shout and curse while more Whites (18%) than Blacks (10%) would send the child to his/her room. For talking back to parents, more Blacks (29%) than Whites (21%) would spank, whip, or shout and curse at the child while more Whites (18%) than Blacks (4%) would send the child to his/her room. When the child swore, more Blacks (32%) than Whites (6%) would whip or spank the child, while more White (13%) than Black (6%) parents would ask child to wash his/her mouth. If the child talked at church, more Black parents (25%) than Whites (10%) would pinch the child while more White parents (10%) than Black parents (1%) would have the child apologize. For fidgeting in church, more Blacks (26%) than Whites (10%)

would pinch the child, while more Whites (31%) than Blacks (19%) would do nothing. If a child stole something, more Black parents (43%) than Whites (16%) would spank or whip the child while more Whites (30%) than Blacks (19%) would have a serious talk with him or her. Finally, if the child hurt an animal, more Whites (49%) than Blacks (25%) would have a serious talk with child while more Black parents (37%) than Whites (14%) would do nothing.

Also, the two groups did not differ regarding how they perceived parents' rationale for punishment. For example, both Black and White subjects acknowledged that parents would punish them for misbehaviors because parents want their kids to achieve great things, or to teach them right from wrong, but not merely to maintain family image or to maintain order in the house. Subjects of both groups also reported that their parents believed that an individual should be an educated and a morally good person. The Black parents, however, were reported as placing a higher premium on the importance of education than their White counterparts ( $t=4.08$ ,  $df=128$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

#### Discussion

The results of this study show that there are many similarities between the races, although there are some interesting differences. In terms of similarities, both African-American parents and White parents would be likely to punish the same behaviors in general and were equally likely to explain to their children why they were being punished. Also, both groups

used spanking or whipping more frequently than other types of punishment, and punished similar kinds of behaviors, such as, fighting with relatives or siblings, throwing tantrums, biting, whining, disobedience, rudeness, name-calling, throwing things, breaking things, lying, cheating, earning bad grades at school, shoplifting, bullying other kids, and making fun of other children. Regarding the immediacy of punishment, both groups were likely to immediately punish misbehavior on the street and at the park, while both groups would more likely postpone punishment for misbehaviors in many other situations, particularly those occurring in public places with audiences.

The two groups were also similar in terms of biographical data such as age of parents when the subject was born, proportion of employed parents, whether or not parents were self-employed or worked for others, or educational level. Thus, this study is different from many other cross-cultural studies, in that the two groups were roughly equivalent in terms of income and education level, although the White subjects slightly more frequently came from more affluent families. Differences, therefore, between the two groups are not easily attributable to income or education.

Interestingly, although there were some differences in discipline practices between African-American parents and White parents, the differences in terms of beliefs were even more important. First, there was a significant difference between the two races, in terms of parent-centered beliefs versus

child-centered beliefs. Specifically, Black subjects were more likely to agree that their parents had parent-centered beliefs than White subjects, that children should be obedient, and that sparing the "rod" spoils the child. African-American parents also were slightly more likely to choose physical punishment than White parents for transgressions. These findings fit with previous research noting that Black parents tend to be more authoritarian than White parents (Baumrind & Black, 1972). However, African American parents also were more likely to believe that children should learn to be independent, which appears contrary to the authoritarian style discussed by Baumrind and her colleagues (Baumrind, 1967; Baumrind & Black, 1972). This finding supports the conclusions by Ogbu (1981) and Darling and Steinberg (1993) that specific parenting practices must be viewed within a cultural context, such as goals, values and attitudes of the parents.

In addition to these differences in beliefs, more African-Americans believed that parents should be more strict with girls than with boys in the family. Further, mothers in African-American families were much more likely to be the disciplinarian in the family, and were more likely to have the highest level of education in the family. These findings are significant, in that while the mother is more likely to be the disciplinarian, previous studies have found that African-American subjects are more likely than White subjects to have a warm relationship with

their mother (Baumrind & Black, 1972; Stinnett, Talley & Walters, 1973). Again, the evidence suggests that parents in different cultures may have different ways of producing instrumental competencies in their offspring (Ogbu, 1981).

Finally, although both groups believed that education is important, and that being a morally good person is important, the African-American parents were more likely to stress the importance of education. One might expect such a finding, given that for African-Americans in our society, education has traditionally been a way out of poverty. Also, this sample comprised a group of African-Americans who were more affluent and educated than the average African-American in our society.

In summary, this study is important in at least two ways: First, it specifically isolates particular discipline practices that are similar and different between African-American and White parents. Second, it begins to identify similarities and differences in beliefs and values regarding discipline and parenting between African-American parents and White parents. As Darling and Steinberg (1993) have cogently argued,

before concluding that authoritative parenting, or for that matter, any other style of parenting, is more or less effective in different cultural contexts, we need to know more about the goals toward which parents socialize their children and the practices they use to achieve these goals. (p. 494)

The results of this study and related research suggest the following directions for future research: First, discipline practices associated with various parenting styles within their cultural context should be further identified. This study has isolated a number of differences in discipline practices between African-Americans and Whites; although parenting styles were not specifically determined, a number of differences in beliefs between the two groups were identified. Second, goals, values and beliefs of different ethnic groups regarding parenting and parent-child relationships should be investigated. Third, research should determine if there are differential outcomes of various discipline practices and parenting styles for various ethnic groups.

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Table 1

Custodial Parent By Race

Race	Two Parents	Mother	Others	Total
African-Americans	40 (59%)	22 (32%)	6	68
Whites	45 (75%)	15 (25%)	0	60
Total	85	37	6	128

$$\chi^2 = 7.93, df=2, p<.05$$

Table 2

Socio-Economic Status (SES) By Race

Race	Low SES ( $< \$40,000$ )	High SES ( $> \$40,000$ )	Total
African-Americans	23 (35%)	42 (65%)	65
Whites	14 (23%)	47 (77%)	61
Total	37	89	126

$$\chi^2 = 2.35, df=1, p>.05$$

Table 3

Parent With Highest Education By Race

Race	Mother	Father	Others	Total
African-Americans	48 (73.8%)	16 (24.6%)	1 (1.5%)	65
Whites	26 (44%)	32 (54.2%)	1 (1.7%)	59
Total	74	48	2	124

$\chi^2 = 11.61$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$

Table 4

Racial Differences in Beliefs About Discipline Practices

African-Americans	Whites
<p>a. Parent-Centered Beliefs</p> <p>Mean: 26.49</p> <p>SD.: 4.80, n=68</p> <p><math>t=3.06</math>, <math>df=128</math>, <math>p&lt;.05</math></p>	<p>a. Parent-Centered Beliefs</p> <p>Mean: 28.84</p> <p>SD.: 3.86, n=62</p>
<p>b. Child-Centered Beliefs</p> <p>Mean: 15.04</p> <p>SD.: 2.96, n=68</p> <p><math>t=1.18</math>, <math>df=128</math>, <math>p&gt;.05</math></p>	<p>b. Child-Centered Beliefs</p> <p>Mean: 14.37</p> <p>SD.: 3.56, n=62</p>

Table 5

Parent Responsible for Punishment By Race

Race	Mother	Father	Others	Total
African-Americans	56 (88%)	6 (9%)	2 (3%)	64
Whites	23 (51%)	22 (49%)	0	45
Total	79	28	2	109

$\chi^2 = 22.29$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$